

F: Polytheism (Theological) – minus 8 points

On this point, I begin with a flag at half-mast. Should it be raised, or lowered fully? After all, most can cope with a gap between what folk say, and what they mean. As long as there is no theological gap, is the verbal gap really material, or mere nitpicking? Of course, nitpicking can usefully prevent lice infestations, since nits become lice, not nice.

The term *god*, in some contexts, should be capitalised. As an absolute, for instance: *God is*. But in a relative setting, a smaller *g* conveys the idea: ultimately there is one god, God, and the gods of the nations are idols, though poetically *gods*. Many songs have an *our god is...* structure. My god is wonderful, your god is precious, our god is healer, etc. Many songs have a predicative (wonderful/precious/holy) god, etc. How's your god today? In Western talk, this can sound like a throwback to polytheism, the idea of many more or less equal gods and goddesses. As a Roman Catholic well said, "*we do not even believe in a god, for this would imply a possible or conceivable multiplication of gods: but only in God*" (George Tyrrell's *Lex Orandi*, 1903:76). I'd allow Tyrrell a little slack: there is a god, but he cannot be a comparative god, but I see Tyrrell's concern—a semantic cliff-edge. I continue to think that ex-Atheist Antony Flew's last book should have been, *There Is God*, not *There Is A God*. Instead of speaking of their rival *concepts* of God, some Muslims speak of *the Christian god*, and some Christians of *the Muslim god*, yet both sides agree that here is no god but God. Muslims and Christians both converge (there is only one god) and diverge (is he is monopersonal or monosocietal?).

C S Lewis noted that "*'mine' in its fully possessive sense cannot be [truthfully] uttered by a human being about anything.*"¹ He then, poetically, pictured demons being spitefully gleeful over the ways in which us humans can wallow, in pride and confusion, over this term which has "*finely graded differences that run from 'my boots' through 'my dog,' 'my servant,' 'my wife,' 'my father,' 'my master' and 'my country,' to 'my god'*" (Lewis 1975:21.109). Too easily we can reduce all the senses to that of 'my boots,' the 'my' of ownership, and even exchange the responsibility of regard, to the irresponsibility of disregard. When Richard Harries wrote, *C S Lewis: The Man and His God* (1987), did the title not say something about Harries' theology? My lucky god has me an hour or two on Sundays; all other hours are, of course, *mine*. McCoy exclaimed, "*my god, Jim,*" not to deify his captain, but as concerned surprise. Who McCoy's god was, *Star Trek* never said, but is it not safer to avoid *my god* talk?

Yet it's in the Bible, isn't it, so it must be right. Is it? Well, not as the highest levels of revelation.² While many biblical passages could reasonably be translated in terms of *God, who is mine*,³ many remain in their polytheistic setting as contrasts between *my god* and *your god*. Scripture was not written as a philosophical treatise, though philosophy should be based on it. Of the Bible versions I've examined, I particularly commend the CEV for seeking to redress this issue.⁴ Quite possibly Ethnic Israel had grammatical and/or theological safety mechanisms that maintained, once attained, philosophical monotheism. But generally, when we talk, it should not be in polytheistic context (contrasting *gods*), since that's not our worldview, nor is it where Scripture was leading to. Likewise if adults, we no longer talk to each other of *moo moos* or the like (1 Cor.13:11). Spiritual adulthood in talk and song.

¹ Does power make true ownership? I capture a wild horse. Does that make the horse truly mine? *The Horse and His Boy* (C S Lewis) gives the lie.

² I readily acknowledge that the NT contains archaic speech patterns, for instance about idols. Nevertheless it does not ride on the simple idea that Rome has its gods but that Christians have their covenant god. For instance, Gal.4:8 taught gentile converts to reject such silly ideas. And 1 Cor.8:5f. underlines that while gentiles talked irrelevantly about gods and divine lords, yet Christians were into true meaning—one lordship, Christ, who revealed one kingdom, his father's. *The god of this age* is only poetically described thus (2 Cor.4:4).

³ Rm.15:6: "God the father of" (eg Geneva/Bishops/KJV) or "the god and father of" (eg CEB/NIV/NRSV)? Similarly, Rm.15:5: "may the god who gives..." (NIV), or simply, "...may God..." (NLT)?

⁴ For my chart, see www.mdtc.eu/wgggodtype.html. The highest version in this larger group test, was the Contemporary English Version (CEV), grading A, followed by the NLT grading C+.

Unless careful, talk about God's attributes can confuse possession with source, reflection with radiance, and the immanence with transcendence. Though technically water is a liquid state of a molecular compound, a batch of H₂O, let's just talk *water* here. A substance cannot have an amount of what it is; water cannot have water. I agree that an amount may have a percentage of a substance and a percentage of impurities, a mixed compound. The sea has a percentage of water, of salt, and of plastic bottles. But as a substance, water is defined *as* water, H₂O, not *by* water. We do not rightly speak of wet water. Likewise, whereas poetical language might say that deity, the tripersonal, is beautiful, philosophical language would say that deity *has* no beauty since deity *is* beauty.⁵ Source, not possession. Think of it this way, that Measure cannot be measured, that Standard cannot be compared to Itself. God is Goodness, Holiness, etc, not simply a good or holy *kind of god*.⁶ Yes, he is always good towards us, and holy to us, but that's talking verbs. It can be difficult for one whose adoptive mother language is philosophy, to speak poetry, when it seems to clash. Indeed Church history has some big examples of the (philosophical?) East and the (prosaic?) West, mistrusting the other because a key word by one side, though used orthodoxly, was wrongly thought by the other to be heterodox, since the other side used that word another way. A lesser issue today—just to give a current example—is one where to some the expression, *born again*, is sacrosanct, and to others it's a mere Nicodemian jest perhaps implying physical rebirth.⁷ What if the latter believed that the former believed in reincarnation? Talking the same language, with the same meaning, is pretty important. Why sing about how our god is, when in fact we believe that God's the only god on show?

I suspect we lack the cultural grammatical and/or theological safety mechanisms, which the biblical writers would have had as second nature. Why attempt their talk patterns of multiple gods, with the evolved nuances of Yahweh as distinct above all other gods, and even the other gods as being secondary, not even sentient, constructs? And if they are not to be in our talk, why differentiate by my/our god? Indeed, nowadays the West has so moved from gods-talk that when it does, it talks a different language. For instance, in the West, what does "gods of the nations" mean? We are likely to reply that our TVs are today's gods, but that's hardly what the psalmists meant, even if we do sacrifice our children to Molek.⁸ It can be putting entertainment and escape before living relationships, and drip-feeding the spirit of the age, but it is not believing that TVs, or other electric gizmos, actually lodge incorporeal nonhuman spirits that have evil intentions. Gods-talk is not what it was. Therefore, when handling the older type of talk, I think that we should at least bias towards a more philosophical way of presenting the biblical data, avoiding lyrics that could seem to contrast one god with another in polytheistic colour. I have some sympathy for Bultmann's demythologisation. I say again, some monotheists, such as Christian and Muslim, contrast themselves as having different gods. Some say that the Christian god isn't their god, Allah. Christians might reply that their own god is loving, some, biblically and semantically confused, that he is Jesus. But it is not *the gods* that differ. God is the only god in show: *the gods* is purely a semantic figment. What differs, are the *concepts* about God. I refuse to sing that my god is such and such a type. I have, I vainly hope, no god. I have God, and he has me, and I am glad.

⁵ That is, the higher excludes the lower. This is not the same as 'Beauty is Deity,' a deification of an attribute.

⁶ Perhaps interestingly the definitions of God as Love and Light come in *First John*, a letter written in response to a philosophical (proto-Gnostic?) attack on God's nature: see 1:5; 4:8/16.

⁷ See my book, *The Word's Gone Global*, which examines the idea that 'born again' was a jocular misreading of Jesus; that only those born from above (Jesus' meaning) are Christians; that even had it been dominical, 'born again' would not define a *type* of Christian. It remains moot as to whether, in our age of apostasy, the term 'Christian' requires explication. See also www.mdtc.eu/wgg0303.html.

⁸ I happily endorse www.movieguide.org for good guidance about movies. All films ideologise; some demand worship, and the entertainment industry can function as Westernism's Molek.